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ABSTRACT

This guide offers practical advice to Latino parents on how to help their children succeed academically. Chapter 1, "About This Booklet," discusses the importance of parent involvement in a child's education and development, and reviews the format of the other five chapters. Chapter 2, "What Is Parent Involvement, and Why Should I Get Involved?" emphasizes the role of the home in learning. Chapter 3, "How Do I Talk with My Child?" develops interpersonal communication skills and discusses the necessity of keeping lines of communication open between parent and child. Chapter 4, "How Do I Help My Child Study?" outlines how, when, where, and what children should study at home and suggests places where parents can find help with homework. Chapter 5, "How Do I Discipline My Child? (And Can the School Follow My Example?)" describes the qualities of good discipline, gives advice on what parents can do if they want to change the discipline policy in their child's school, and includes a list of steps to take if a child is suspended. Chapter 6, "What Are My Rights To Be Involved in the School?" reviews parents' legal right to know what is going on in the child's classroom, to work for changes, and to obtain special education when needed. Each chapter includes discussion questions and exercises to help parents work with other parents to explore how to improve their children's success at school. A list of 12 references, a list of participating organizations, and a brief description of the ASPIRA Association are appended. (FMW)

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ASPIRA Association, Inc.
Institute for Policy Research

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# Making the Most of Your Child's Education:

# A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

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Prepared for the ASPIRA Hispanic Community Mobilization for Dropout Prevention Project

UD 027 159



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# Making the Most of Your Child's Education: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Prepared for the ASPIRA Hispanic Community Mobilization for Dropout Prevention Project

Published by the ASPIRA Institute for Policy Research, Washington, D.C., 1989

Written and produced by Elena Pell and Elizabeth Weiser-Ramírez
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## Introduction

In 1961, a group of Puerto Rican parents and professionals, concerned with the large number of students who were dropping out of high school, met in New York City. They founded ASPIRA to help develop the leaders of the future needed to improve the conditions of their community.

ASPIRA was born out of a community mobilization effort and it has grown through the continuous involvement of volunteers working jointly. We are a community helping ourselves to move forward.

Unfortunately, many people still think that Latino parents don't really care about their children's education. They think that parents are somehow responsible for their children's low achievement in school. Since its founding, ASPIRA has been living proof of the interest of parents and other members of the community in ensuring an excellent education for their children. Our joint efforts have promoted the growth of ASPIRA into five states and Puerto Rico, with a national office in Washington, D.C. Hispanic communities have also mobilized to establish many other community agencies such as those which collaborated with ASPIRA on this project.

This booklet, *Making the Most of Your Child's Education: A Guide for Parents,* is part of ASPIRA's efforts to continue the forward movement of our communities. It is designed to offer practical advice to Latino parents on how to help their children succeed.

We know that together we can make a difference because together we *have* been making a difference.

Janice Petrovich

Janice Petrovich, Ed.D.
National Executive Director

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# Topic #1: About This Booklet

# About this Booklet

## Why Was This Booklet Written?

**This booklet,** ***Making the Most of Your Child's Education: A Guide for Parents,*** **was created especially for you, because you matter the most. You are the most important person in your child's education and development.**

**BECAUSE YOU MATTER:** when we began this project, we started by asking people like you what issues were most important to them in improving the education of their children. This is how we chose the topics for this booklet. It doesn't cover everything, but it covers some very important subjects. It is designed to be a first step to improving your ability to work with your children at home, and through the school, to do the best, and be the best that they are capable of.

**BECAUSE YOU MATTER:** we created a booklet that is easy to read and understand, and available in both Spanish and English. This booklet will help guide you even if you are not yet familiar with how the school system works, have never been a member of a parent group before, or if you want to help your child do better in school, but don't know where to start.

**BECAUSE YOU MATTER:** parents like you were asked to comment on these booklets before we printed them. We heard from Latino parents from all over the mainland U.S. and Puerto Rico. They gave us their comments on the drafts of these brochures, and gave us important feedback on how to make these materials work for the community.

# How to Use This Booklet

Use this booklet as a guide through some very important issues about parent involvement. Don't feel you have to read it all at once! It is designed for careful thought and discussion. You'll want to use it again, share it with family and friends, discuss the topics in groups of parents and with your children.

Each of the four topics starts with a story we called "a parent's challenge." These situations may sound familiar. Maybe you, or someone you know, are experiencing these difficulties. Or your challenges might be different. The advice and ideas on each of the topics cover many different concerns parents have.

The topics include discussion questions and exercises at the end. That's because we wanted to create something that would help parents work with other parents to explore how to improve their children's success at school.

Many of you who will receive this booklet are already meeting with other parents. Most of you have a person from a school or community organization who is experienced in these issues working with you. They are wonderful resources. If you are already meeting with other parents, you know that parent's groups can be very helpful. They can remind you that you are not alone in the problems you face. Parent groups are extremely good places for sharing information and ideas. Finally, getting together with other Latino parents can give you a chance to discuss ways to improve education and schools. Encourage other parents to come with you to these meetings! If you are not meeting with other parents, it might be time to start!

Of course, there are many topics you will want to find out more about. This booklet is just a beginning. It is our hope that once you finish this booklet, you'll have found ten new things you'll want to get together with other parents to talk about!

# Topic #2: What is Parent Involvement, and Why Should I Get Involved?

# What is Parent Involvement, and Why Should I Get Involved?

## What is Parent Involvement?

What does "parent involvement" really mean? It means the many things that you can do that will have a positive influence on your child's education.

When your child was small, he or she needed guidance from you on just about everything. Now that your child has been in school for a number of years, they still need you. **Did you know that what happens in the home is one of the biggest influences on how well a child does in school?** It's true. Studies have shown that parent involvement makes a difference. Even as your child gets older you can do a lot to contribute to his or her success at school.

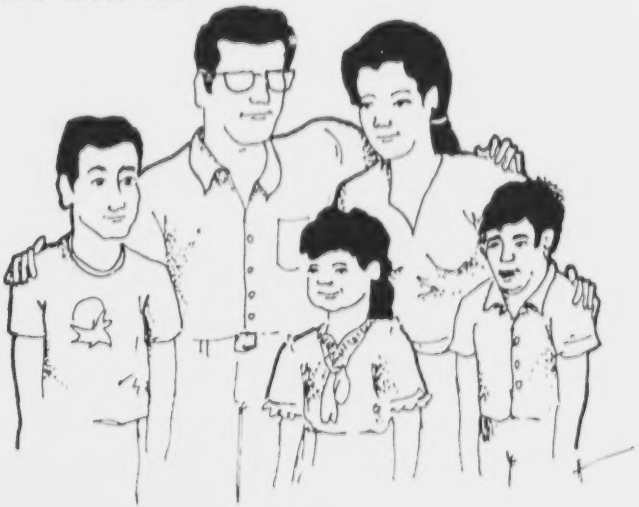
The schools need your help too. You know your child better than anyone--you can give their teachers important guidance. You can help them develop school policies and practices that better meet the needs of the Hispanic community.

No, you can't do all this at once! The first step is to work on those things that are the most important concerns for you now. The important thing to keep in mind is that families and friends working **together** for our children can make a difference.

# Why Should I Get Involved?

Creating a better education for Hispanic youth will require the involvement of many people. It will be a long, and sometimes difficult, process, with lots of little successes along the way. Someone may have already talked to you about the fact that today over 50% of Hispanic youth will not finish high school. You are probably already concerned about doing whatever you can to make sure that your child succeeds in school and in the world of work. If your child is getting bad grades, acting up at school, hanging around with a rough crowd, losing interest in learning, you are especially concerned. However, in today's complicated world, all children are in some way at risk of not reaching their potential. Even children who seem to be doing all right will face difficult challenges. They need your guidance. **Remember, learning not only happens at school, but at home.** This process never stops. You are the most important teacher in your child's life!

**Parent involvement means creating a good learning environment at home, and working with the school to assure that your child is getting the best education there too.**



# Topic #3: How Do I Talk With My Child?

# How Do I Talk With My Child?

*A PARENT'S CHALLENGE: María Sánchez is in her kitchen preparing dinner. Ms. Sánchez was divorced two years ago, and is barely getting by. The three young ones are fighting again. After an eight-hour day at the gift store, she's wondering how she can get through it all. Then Juan, her 16 year old, comes home to tell her he's decided to drop out of school and get a job. She says he's crazy. He says he's a man now, and he's doing it to help out the family. There are so many things he doesn't understand, she thinks. He now wants to go out with his friends; her rice is about to burn. When can Sra. Sánchez find time to talk to Juan?*

*How can she help him with a decision that will change his future?*

The first step in helping a child become a responsible adult is to start talking with him.* This is often not too easy, especially when he's a teenager and sometimes does things that make you angry or worried.

It's a hard time for a parent. However, it's also a hard time for a child.

He is changing from being a child to becoming an adult. He doesn't know very well how to make this change. Your teenager is facing new decisions. Before, mama or papa made the decisions for him. Now, his schoolmates, workmates, and friends are insisting that he make his own decisions. Whether or not to stay in school, buy a car, drink, smoke, have a girlfriend--all of these are important decisions for him.

*To make these topics more personal, we talk about "him" and "her" instead of "them."

Young people can learn to make good, responsible decisions with the help of someone who has more experience. Guided by you, as his parent, your teenager can make better decisions.

This can only work, though, if there is good communication between you and your child. This pamphlet gives you several ideas about how to talk better with your child, and how to get him to talk better with you.

Adolescence is a time for your teenager to look at the world around him with new eyes. He sees different things than his parents see. He doesn't understand his parents, and he gets frustrated when his parents don't

understand him. If your family has come to the mainland United States recently, this lack of understanding between parents and children can be even more severe. Your memories of what it was like growing up in another place may not seem to fit into your children's world.

While your teenager wants to be unique and independent, he is also uncertain about what path to take. Looking for his own identity, he sometimes tries very hard to be different from his parents' generation. A teenager creates new ways to dress, to speak, and to act.

He has new ideas. For a Hispanic teenager, this identity crisis is doubled: as a young person he needs to find his own unique identity; as a Hispanic in this society he needs to have a sense of his own culture and feel part of the group. Confronting a clash of both generations and cultures, he has to struggle to shape his own identity.

In addition, for many Hispanic families, the difficulties of day to day survival put more pressure on everyone, including your teenager. Perhaps because of your work schedule you cannot spend as much time with your child as you would like, or be as involved in his schoolwork. Perhaps your teenager needs to work to help support the family, or you rely on him to help with family chores and childcare. Sometimes, in the middle of daily crises, finding time to talk with your teenager about his concerns isn't very easy.

**Even if he may seem like an adult or not want your advice, though, your teenager still needs you to help him understand and make decisions about his confusing--and sometimes threatening--world.**

## How can you help him?

There are two important skills which you need so you can communicate better with your child. The first is **listening** so that he can speak to you. The second is **speaking** so that he will listen. Many times, conversations between parents and children sound too much like this:

> **Parent:** "Why don't you do what you're supposed to do? You never listen to what I tell you!"
>
> **Teenager:** "You're always yelling at me! You don't understand me at all!"

**Even if you are very busy, try to set aside five or ten minutes a day for a quiet conversation with each of your children.** In these open conversations, you and your child should be able to express different points of view. Each of you should both speak and listen. Below are some ideas to help your communication.

## Be interested.

Show your child you care what he is saying by setting aside what you were doing when he begins to talk with you. Listen to his words. Also pay attention to what he doesn't say. If he tells you he's fine but his face is sad or scared, you know he's trying to tell you something else.

## Let your child speak.

Smile at him to show you understand or agree when he pauses. Keep your questions short, open and friendly, but don't ask "why." Many times teenagers aren't sure why they feel or do things. If you repeat the important ideas of what he is telling you, he will know that you are really listening.

## Don't talk too much.

The best moment to stop speaking is before he stops listening. If you feel you need to say something, say it. Then ask for his opinion. This helps him to understand exactly what you are talking about, and shows you value his ideas.

## Try to sympathize.

It's hard to sympathize with a teenager, but try to accept his feelings. If you understand his feelings, you will understand better his actions. Accept the fact that teenagers will always complain. Let him get out all his complaints without interrupting him or changing the subject.

### Listen and speak with respect.

Speak to your child like you speak to your adult friends. Don't try to dominate the conversation.

### Show your feelings.

Let your child know that you are a human being who can feel hurt, uncertain, or scared. When he does something that makes you mad, don't tell him he is lazy, or irresponsible, or bad. Tell him, "It makes me angry when you do that." Let him see that his actions have consequences for you.

Once you and your child are speaking more openly to each other, you can start helping him to make responsible decisions for himself. A teenager needs to have the opportunity to practice making decisions. If you make all the decisions for your child, or protect him so much that he never has to face difficult choices, then he never learns how to become an adult.

Parents can work with their children, sharing with them ways to make better decisions. Below are some suggestions for discussing decision-making with your teenager.

### Believe that he has decisions to make.

A teenager, especially today, has to make decisions all the time that can affect his life. You need to accept that this is true before you start talking with him.

> Let's get back to the situation of Juan, who says he wants to drop out of school. Let's look at how you as a parent would help him think through his decision.

## Make sure the situation is clear.

Practice your new skill of speaking clearly to make sure that both you and your child are talking about the same thing. Also make sure that you and he have the real facts of the situation.

> What about Juan wanting to drop out to earn money? Does Juan know that having a high school diploma pays off? These days, a high school graduate earns in his lifetime up to $250,000 more than a high school dropout.

## Look for alternatives.

Together, make a list of all the possible ways to solve the problem. Write down all the possible choices that either of you think of, even if they seem impossible or silly. Later on you can cross off some of them.

> Could he get an after-school job? Could he go to summer school and graduate early? Could he take the GED exam? Could he hold off earning money until later?

## Look at the possible consequences.

Next to each alternative, write down all the good and bad points it would have. Again, each of you should make sure to write down even consequences that seem silly or wrong to the other person.

> After school job: Good points--money, work experience
>
> Bad points--less time for friends, homework

## Discuss feelings, beliefs, and morals.

After you look at the good and bad points of a possible decision, help your child to think about moral values and beliefs, and to be honest with himself about his feelings.

> Does he want to be a high school dropout? Will it bother him if people think he's stupid? Is it that important to have money now?

## Discuss what society thinks is acceptable behavior.

What a teenager and his friends think is the right way to act may not be what society thinks is correct. Discuss with him what the larger society will think of his decision.

> What do people in general think of dropouts? Do they get respect or good-paying jobs?

## Choose the best solution to the problem.

After you have discussed all the facts, the alternatives, and the consequences of each alternative, you are together ready to make a decision and follow through with it.

> If Juan decides to stay in school for now, but still wants to earn money, you could agree to go together to meet the work-study program director, or to keep an eye open for part-time jobs.

It may be that even after you have talked over all the consequences with him, Juan still decides to drop out of school. It's important for you not to feel discouraged or give up. Keep talking and listening to him--he still has some choices. With your help, he may realize later that getting his high school diploma is important. He may not go back to school, but he could get his diploma through a GED program. Or, he could attend a job training program. **Remember, keep the lines of communication open.**

Perhaps hardest of all, try to respect your child's decisions. He may not always do what you would do in his situation. However, showing respect and keeping the lines of communication open lets your child take some steps towards adulthood while knowing that he can always come back to you for help in making better and better decisions.

# Questions for Group Discussion

1) Ask members of the group:

What are some new situations and challenges you see your children facing today that are different from the decisions you faced when you were a child?

2) Ask the group:

Suppose your child came to you and told you that he or she wants to drop out of school. How can you help them think through this decision?

Try doing this as a role-playing exercise. One person in the group can pretend to be the child, while another person is the parent. Have a 3-5 minute conversation on this subject. Afterwards, the members of the group can comment on the communication in the role-play, using guidelines from the brochure.

# Topic #4: How Do I Help My Child Study?

# How Do I Help My Child Study?

*A PARENT'S CHALLENGE: Ana Colón, who is twelve years old, brings home a report card with three D's and two C's. Her teachers say she is a smart girl, but she doesn't do her work and she isn't prepared for tests. Her papa tells her she spends too much time with her friends and not enough time studying. She says she can't concentrate at home because it's too noisy and there's no place for her to study.*

*What kind of a solution can the Colóns work out so she doesn't fail her classes?*

As a parent, you want your child to have the best life possible. Today that means finishing high school and even going to college. Lots of Hispanic parents worry that the schools aren't doing enough to help their children succeed. About half of all Hispanic children drop out of school before they graduate.

Who can help these kids if the schools can't?

**YOU can, that's who!**

No matter what the school is like, or what kind of neighborhood you live in, parents are still the most important people in a child's life. Now, nothing can guarantee that your child will succeed, and it's certainly a help when the school and community are working with you for her success. But whatever your situation, there are some specific things you can do to help your child succeed in school and in life.

The best way for your child to do well in school is for her to have STUDY TIME. Every single school night, all of your children need to sit down and do their homework. **It's really simple: children who study do better in school, and children who do better in school are more likely to graduate.** If you want to help your child graduate, you need to make sure she studies.

## HOW?

Now, how can you do that? If you wait until your child brings home bad grades, and then say, "You're going to study every night and that's final!" what will happen? She will feel that studying is a punishment, instead of the key to her future success.

A better way is to make sure she understands, like you do, that studying is important for her future. Start talking with her about school. How does she like it? What subjects does she find interesting, or difficult? How often does she have tests? When your child brings home a report card that you think could be better, discuss with her what the family can do to help. Decide together to set aside study time each day. Of course, it's best if you can start your child studying even when she's very young--this way it gets to be a habit!

## WHEN?

Now that you've decided on study time, you're probably wondering just what this requires. On average, we recommend that you set aside two hours every evening. The amount of time you decide is correct can depend on the age of your child and the grade she is in. Right after dinner is often a good time--this way your child can play or work while it's still daylight, and then stay home at night. If you eat at 6:00, for example, 6:30

to 8:30 can be set aside for QUIET study time. That's right--no noise! Especially no radios or television. Children always say that they can study and watch TV at the same time. Don't believe them. The experts say they can't.

## WHERE?

Where should she study? Anywhere she can set her books and papers is fine. The kitchen table is a great place, or a coffee table or even the floor. The important thing is that she have a "study corner"--a special quiet spot in your house that is a child's personal place to do homework.

## WHAT?

So, now that she's in her study corner, ready to begin, what should your child be studying? There are

several ways that you can find out what your child should be learning. The first way (of course) is to ask her. You can help her keep track of homework by getting or making her a calendar--the cheaper the better, as long as it has big enough spaces to write assignments in. Encourage your child to write down on her calendar any tests that are coming up and any projects that are due. This will help her (and you!) know when to begin preparing for due dates. Children usually have daily assignments that they need to do for the next day's class. They can work on these during their study time, too.

Another person who can tell you what your child should be studying is her teacher. You can ask the teacher to let you know if she isn't doing the required homework or misses turning in a project. The teacher can also tell you what she should know, or be able to do, by the end of the semester. This gives you the reason for her homework assignments. It also lets you judge how much she is learning. If the teacher tells you the class will be able to do fractions by Christmas, and at Christmastime your child still can't understand fractions, you will know that it's time to talk to the teacher again. **You should try very hard to get to know your child's teacher as soon as you can, and then visit the teacher *at least* once a year.** Teachers say they pay more attention to a child if her parents are interested in how she is doing.

## WHAT ABOUT HELP?

You might be worrying by now about what to do when your child asks for help with her homework. Maybe you don't think you understand what she's doing, particularly if you didn't get to finish school or if you have trouble with the English. Don't worry, help is out there! You just need to find it.

## Places to Find Help With Homework

**Your Other Children.** You can encourage your children to help their younger brothers and sisters with their homework. This helps them take responsibility for each other. It's important to remember, though, that your older children need plenty of time to do their *own* homework.

**The School.** Lots of schools have after-school tutoring programs that your child can go to. Some schools also run a Homework Hotline, where your child can just telephone in and get help!

**Community Agencies.** Local agencies run lots of programs to help young people with school. Sometimes the child can go to the agency, and sometimes they send volunteer tutors to your home. They may also have recreation programs for your child and parent support groups for you.

**Local Colleges.** They often have programs where students volunteer as tutors. You may want to ask someone at the school or community agency if they know of any college programs you can call.

**Local Libraries.** Libraries are great for helping your child learn. They sometimes have homework assistance programs. They also have thousands of books on all subjects, plus special young people's books. Anyone can borrow these books for several weeks after getting a free library card. Librarians can help your child with any reports she needs information on. Libraries also run special programs during the summer and on weekends. They even have lots of tables which make perfect "study corners." Getting to know your local library can be a great way for you to help your kids.

Besides all these outside resources, there *is* something really important that *you* can help your younger children with even if you have absolutely *no* education or English. This thing is almost certain to improve your children's school performance. What is it? YOU CAN HAVE YOUR CHILDREN READ TO YOU. Reading is probably the most important skill they will learn, and young children learn it better when they can read to their parents and then talk about what they've read. It's also fun!

Another fun reading project that one of our field coordinators told us about is having a Family Reading Night. Once a week everyone in the family gets together with one *short* story or speech that they want to read aloud. You might want to make it especially fun for the kids by telling them they can also choose special snacks to eat. Each person takes a turn reading his or her short paper to the family. If you want your children to maintain their Spanish, or if you or other relatives feel more comfortable speaking in Spanish, you can have the evening be bilingual. Sometimes an older person in the family never really learned to read, and they can be encouraged to tell stories from memory instead.

## WHAT IF SHE WON' T STUDY?

Sometimes, even after you've gone through all this work to help her, your child tells you that she simply does not want to study. What do you do then?

Children (especially teenagers) do what interests them and what they think is important. *You* know how important it is for your child to do well in school--make sure you let her know! Talk with your child about what she wants to do in her future. Then talk about what she needs to do to achieve her dreams. Most good jobs today require an education--encourage your child to dream big dreams and then do the school work needed to reach them.

One final problem you may run into is that your children don't have enough homework to fill the two hours. DON'T shorten the time! This would encourage your children to rush through their work, or even to lie about homework when they don't want to study. Keep the two hours as study time every night, but let your children read library books or write a letter to a relative or some similar activity. Their teachers could also recommend extra projects in an area they are interested in. Remember, encourage their interests and the extra work they do to develop those interests.

Finally, don't forget all those educational programs on the television. Those nature or science or history shows can satisfy your child's desire to watch TV, and they also can spark an interest in a field she didn't even know existed.

One important note: if you follow the suggestions in this chapter and your child is still doing badly in school, you may want to get outside help. This is especially true if your child was doing all right in school before, and suddenly starts failing. There may some physical problem (maybe she needs glasses!) or some other reason for her poor performance. If you think you need advice, talk with a community agency, school organization, or a hot-line (see page 59) to get the help you need.

# ISN' T THIS A LOT OF WORK?

This may seem like a lot of work for a tired, hardworking parent! But let's look at the suggestions again:

1) Set up two hours of study time each school night
2) Give each child a special place to work in
3) Set up a calendar of due dates with each child
4) Meet with their teachers at least once a year
5) Use the resources available to help you (schools, agencies, libraries)
6) Let your children read to you
7) Talk about the future with your children
8) Encourage them to do what they're interested in
9) Get outside help if your child continues to have problems

What will your home be like after you set up Study Time? After dinner each night, all your children will pull out their books and study or read for two hours. No blaring radio, no fights over what to watch on TV, no worrying by you over where they are or what they're doing. And thanks to your efforts, your children have a better chance to make it through school, and succeed in life.

# Questions for Group Discussion

1) Ask members of the group:

When you were in school, what were some things you did to complete your homework?
- Did you study with friends?
- Did you prefer to study alone in a quiet place?
- Did you go to the library or some other study place?

What do you think will work best for your children?

2) Ask the group what kinds of after-school programs are offered by the school or in the community.

3) Ask each person in the group to say *one* thing that they can do right away to help their child study.

# Topic #5: How Do I Discipline My Child?

# How Do I Discipline My Child?

## (And Can the School Follow My Example?)

*A PARENT'S CHALLENGE: Gilberto, who is 13, comes home from school, saying that another boy jumped him in the hall and they started fighting. The principal has suspended him from school for a week. Gilberto swears that the fight wasn't his fault. He tells his mother he's just as happy to be out of school--now he won't have to take the two big tests he has that week. His father asks if this won't hurt his grades, but he shrugs and says, "I can't help it if they don't want me in school. Maybe I should just stay away for good."*

*What can Mr. and Mrs. Martínez do as concerned parents?*

How your child is disciplined in school can make a big difference in whether he ends up liking school and enjoying learning, or resenting school and leaving as soon as he can.

Many parents are concerned these days about possible harmful discipline in their children's schools. Suspension from school for small mistakes is something that many parents are especially concerned about. At the same time, teachers are also complaining about school discipline. They say that students are harder to handle than they used to be, and they put a lot of the blame on parents who "let their kids run wild."

Clearly, good discipline is an important issue to both parents and teachers. However, they often don't agree on the best way to handle it.

This chapter describes some qualities of good discipline, and gives advice on what you can do if you want to change a discipline policy in your child's school.

Ideally, the approach to discipline that your school uses should be something you can also use in your home. The best discipline starts when children are small. It may *seem* that spanking or withholding privileges are the most effective ways to deal with a naughty child. Actually, these are not necessarily the best ways to deal with discipline. Yes, you can spank a child or send him to his room when he is small, but as he grows older (and bigger) he learns he can tell *you* no. Many parents and teachers who rely on physical punishments have been frustrated by a teenager they can't control anymore!

## There is another way.

The important thing to remember is that you want to *correct* bad behavior, not just *control* your child (we've seen that control doesn't always work with teenagers!). Correcting bad behavior means helping your child learn the proper way to act, and teaching him self-discipline. This means that even if you (or the teacher) are not watching over your child, he knows the right thing to do, and does it. These are qualities he will need not only to be a well-behaved child, but also a mature adult.

## How do you correct bad behavior in your child?

First, he should understand *why* his actions are wrong. Your teenager will think it is very unfair if you set pointless rules. He will spend more time trying to break them than trying to follow them! When you need to discipline your child, explain to him *why* he needs to be disciplined. With an older child, try asking him for his ideas on proper rules. Let him suggest some consequences for breaking those rules. If possible, these rules should apply to everyone in the house. For instance, if you tell your child not to swear in the house, remember to set the example by not swearing either. When a child feels that the rules belong to everyone, he will try harder to follow them. This is teaching self-discipline.

Second, a child who does something wrong needs to face the *consequences* of that action. If your teenager breaks a window in your apartment, don't *punish* him by yelling or shutting him in his room. Make sure, however, that he has to pay for the new window! And don't just give your child the money. Insist that he earn it. Taking responsibility for our actions is a key quality for an adult.

## These same discipline practices work in schools.

Continually punishing or putting down your child will not make him do more homework or behave in class. Instead, he will lose his self-esteem. He won't want to go to 'that school where they're always making me look stupid!" A lot of the kids who get spanked when they're younger, suspended when they're older, and continually put down in public eventually drop out of school. With all that negative attention, though, you might say they were pushed out!

Just like at home, discipline at school should focus on *correcting* (not *controlling*) the child's behavior. That means, first, finding out why he is acting up or failing a class. It also means that the class rules are clear to all the students, and that the students have a part in making and carrying out the rules. When students are involved in making the rules, rules aren't just there to try to break! When students are *self*-disciplined, the teacher doesn't have to be constantly disciplining students' behavior--the students do it themselves.

How can teachers help students face the consequences of their actions? Here's an example:

> Daniel and Maribel both fail a science test because they didn't study enough. Daniel's teacher announces to the class as she's handing out the papers, "These people did extremely well on the test. But these people (including Daniel)

must not have studied. They were probably out in the streets again, instead of at home with their books." When Daniel goes home with his bad grade, his mother yells at him for being so stupid, and tells him he's grounded for two weeks. Daniel has learned that school makes him feel stupid, and he hates it.

**Now, let's try this another way...**When Maribel's teacher hands back their tests, he doesn't mention anything about people's grades. He puts a note on Maribel's test to talk to him if she doesn't understand what they're learning. When Maribel goes home with this bad grade, her mother sits her down tells her they are going to work out a schedule of when Maribel will study each night. Maribel has learned that she needs to study to avoid bad grades, but that help is available if she needs it.

If you're concerned about the kind of discipline practiced at your child's school, there are some steps you can take to find out more.

First, call the school to get a written copy of their discipline policy, or ask them to explain it to you. Remember, you have the right to request a translation if you need one. Sometimes schools will send the policy home with the child at the beginning of the year. Sometimes they ask you to sign it, but read it carefully first! *Don't* sign anything you don't agree with.

Second, talk with your child. Does he feel comfortable in school? Does he like his classes and his teachers? If it seems that the teacher is doing something different than the discipline policy says, call the school office and arrange to sit in on the class. You have the right to do this as a parent.

When you're in the classroom, there are some warning signs for you to look for. Anything that divides the class into "good" and "bad" students can make some students feel humiliated by just being in school. If you see some of the practices described in the box on the next page in your child's class, and you disagree with them, arrange to talk with the teacher.

Explain to the teacher what specific activities you disagree with. You may want to discuss some of the ideas in this brochure about helping children learn self-discipline without losing self-esteem, and correcting, not controlling, the children. Try to be positive, suggesting other ways of disciplining and not just criticizing. Remember, if this teacher is comparing your children to others, putting them down, etc., then you are trying to correct the teacher's bad behavior, too!

## Warning Signs in Your Child's Classroom

Performance charts to show how each student is doing

Names on the board for acting up, and any other ways to put down students in public

Lists posted of the good students

Lists of punishments that the teacher or the school have made up without students' ideas

Teachers who yell, threaten, or put students down

Teachers who give out candy, stickers, or other "rewards" to the good students

Students tattling on each other

Children who seem too quiet, or have signs of tension like tics, stammers, or are afraid to answer questions

Teachers who compare students (like Daniel's teacher in the above example)

Another thing you should do is to talk with other parents. Does the discipline policy seem to be bad for their children too? Several of you can go and talk with the teacher. If nothing changes, your group of parents may want to talk to the principal. Explain why you think the current discipline practices aren't good, and suggest alternatives. One positive thing to suggest would be that a group of parents, teachers, and administrators work together to come up with a better discipline policy. Ideas to propose could include:

- The teacher holds class meetings regularly, so the class can make plans and rules as a group, show appreciation for *all* class members, and deal with problems together. One important rule of these meetings is everyone treats each other with respect.
- The teacher helps the class develop a strong group spirit, and students agree to help one another instead of competing.
- Classroom jobs are shared with students.
- The teacher gives students the example of working together for solutions to problems, not just telling students what to do.

Once you get to know your child's teachers, you'll be happy to find out that many of them are dedicated, capable, and want the best for your child. You will find teachers who are happy to meet and work with you as a team to improve your child's school experience.

These suggestions can be useful if your child generally gets lots of put downs or punishments instead of praise. What do you do, though, if the school disciplines your child in a severe way that you think is wrong?

## What should you do, for example, if your child is wrongfully suspended?

Suspension from school has become widely used as a form of discipline, especially for high school students. This is a punishment that should only be used if the student is physically threatening to other students. Suspension for less serious problems is seldom a good idea.

Keeping students out of school hurts them by making them lose class time. These forced absences often mean the difference between passing and failing.

## What to Do if Your Child is Suspended

1) Find out from your child exactly what happened, and why. Did he have a chance to explain his side to the school? Approach him with an attitude of trust.

2) Tell the school officials you want a "hearing" to discuss the situation. When you set up the hearing, remind them that your child has a right to stay in class until the hearing date. He is innocent until proven guilty.

3) Check the school discipline policy to make sure school officials followed the suspension rules.

4) Bring a friend to the hearing. A good person might be someone from a Latino community organization. Ask to tape the hearing, and if they say no, ask your friend to take notes.

5) Explain your position, and ask school officials to explain *exactly* why they suspended your child. Also ask them what other actions they took before the suspension to discipline him.

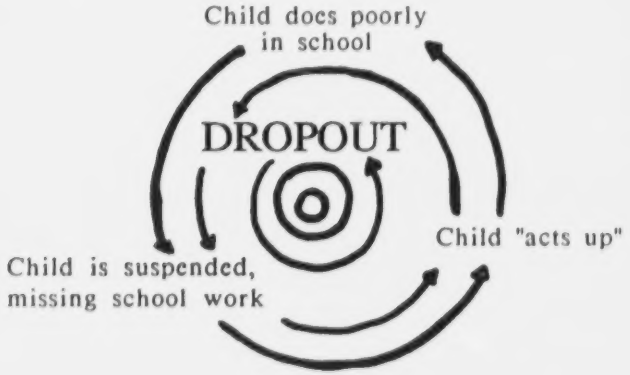
6) Remember: your child can only be suspended for a specific act he has just committed. If school officials start talking about past actions, or his attitude, or the way you raise him, or anything else, let them know that those aren't grounds for *this* suspension.

7) At the hearing, if you think your child's punishment is too strict, ask the officials if they will reduce the time of the suspension.

8) Most of all, **stay calm!** Tell your friend to remind you occasionally not to lose your temper.

After the hearing, school officials must send you their decision in writing. You can then appeal their decision to the school board if you want. By this point it would be a good idea to talk to your parent group or a community advocacy agency for help with this process. If you do appeal, though, your child has the right to stay in school until the appeal date arrives.

If you can't get the school to change its policy and your child remains suspended, try to make sure that he doesn't fall behind in his school work. Ask the principal if he can make up the missed work, and if the principal says no, ask each one of his teachers. Too often a child's history with school ends up looking like this:




Schools practicing good discipline don't "punish" children by suspension. Suspension is just another example of trying to *control* the child instead of finding out what's wrong and *correcting* it. It's the easy way out.

Schools and parents work best as a team, focusing on what is best for the child. Good discipline highlights teamwork to develop responsible adults. Whenever you think the school's discipline policies may *not* be best for your child, then it's time to work with other parents and with the school to change those harmful policies.

# Questions for Group Discussion

1) Ask members of the group:

   How satisfied are you with the way discipline is handled at your child's school?

   a) Do you think it is effective?

   b) Would you like to see anything handled in a different way?

2) What are some techniques you could use to discipline a child at home? What do you think works best for you?

3) (Role Playing) Two people in the group can do a role playing exercise. One can be the child, the other their parent. The school has called to say the child has been absent too much. The parent didn't know this, and is just realizing that their child has been truant (missing classes).

   Role play a discussion between parent and child on this issue. Have the group comment on the role play.

4) The school is saying they want to keep Juanita/Juan back a year because she/he skipped too many classes. You don't agree. You feel you have solved the problem, because Juanita/Juan has agreed to work harder at school. Role play a discussion that includes: a) you, b) your child, c) a school official.

# Topic #6: What Are My Rights to Be Involved in the School?

# What Are My Rights to Be Involved in the School?

*A PARENT'S CHALLENGE: Some months ago, Mr. and Mrs. Pérez's daughter's principal and her counselor called them to a meeting at the school. They told them that Carolina, who struggles through her classes, scored poorly on a diagnostic test. At that time they suggested she take a test to find out if she has any kind of special problems. With the Pérez's written permission, Carolina took the test. Now the school officials want to take her out of her regular classroom for half of the day and put her into a special class. Joaquín Pérez, her father, thinks the major part of her problem is that she was taken out of bilingual classes too early. If she could work better in English she would do all right.*

***Do Sr. and Sra. Pérez really have a say in whether or not their daughter is put in a special class? Do they have the right to request that she be given another type of test?***

Do you care about your child's future? Of course you do! Do you know if the education she is receiving is good enough to ensure a successful future? Maybe not.

As a parent, you have the right to be involved in her education. This means that you have the right to know what's going on at her school, and you have the right to work for changes so she will have the best education possible.

Perhaps you don't feel too comfortable going into your child's school and talking with her teachers. The following information was written to help you feel more confident by letting you know what you can legally expect from the school. **The law is on your side, so get involved in your child's education!**

First off, you may be wondering: Why should I get involved? Don't teachers go to college just to learn how to deal with children? Don't they know more than anyone about teaching your child? Well, it's true that teachers play a big role in your child's education. But you, as a parent, know more about your child than anyone else! **All the experts say that children do the best in school when parents and teachers work together as a team.** Furthermore, as a Hispanic parent, you not only know your own child better than the teacher does, you also know your culture better. You can be a valuable resource for your child's teacher as he or she tries to understand her background. You can also be a strong advocate for your child's heritage if you think the teacher doesn't understand Hispanics.

Other reasons why you have the *right* to be involved in the school include:

Public schools are supported by your tax dollars.

You elect the school board, and teachers and principals are accountable to them.

The public school system was organized to serve the community, especially children and their parents. A school needs to be open and responsive to the needs of the community it serves.

## What are your rights as an involved parent?

The most important right your family has is the right for your child to go to school. Even if the family members are not legal residents in this country, *all* children have the right to a free and appropriate public education.

As a parent, you have a right to all kinds of information about your child's school experience. You can call or visit the school and ask all of the following questions:

- What examinations and shots are required for my child to enter school?
- What happens if she gets sick at school?
- What should I do if she is sick and can't attend school?
- Will the school tell me if she is absent?
- How many days can she miss or be late without a penalty?
- What happens if she acts up at school?
- What are the reasons ("grounds") and the steps that must be followed ("procedures") for suspension from school?
- Who makes the school rules? The principal? The teacher? The school board? Is it state legislation?
- What can I do if I disagree with school rules and policies?
- What and how is my child being taught? What courses is she taking? What books and other materials are used?
- What is the background and experience of her teachers and principal?
- What is the calendar for the school year (dates of parent/teacher conferences, holidays, report cards, etc.)?

- What does she have to do to get a good grade in a class? What classes are required for graduation? Is homework mandatory?

You also have the right to look at school documents and meet with school personnel such as teachers, the principal, and the school board. You have the right to:

- Look at all records kept by the school about your child. You also have the right to challenge information in those records that is wrong or that you think is an invasion of your family's privacy.

- Visit the school and your child's classroom. First you need to call the school office to make arrangements and set up a time with the classroom teacher. However, you have the right to see her teacher and the school principal without "red tape" and delay.

- Have individual conferences with the teacher several times a year. These conferences should be held in private. You have the right to request a translator if you would like one. The time for the conferences should be convenient to both you and the teacher, and they can be held at home if that is the only way both of you can meet.

- Organize and participate in parent organizations. You and your parents' group also have the right to attend and speak at school board meetings.

# Special Rights for Special Education

The law says that children have the right to an *appropriate* education. This means that if your child isn't learning in her regular classroom, she has the right to receive special help.

- You have the right to ask that your child be tested to see if she needs special help. You also have the right to *refuse* to have your child tested. It's good to talk with the school about the *best* way to help your child.

- You also have the right to have your child tested again by someone from outside the school if you disagree with the school's results.

- The school must involve you in developing the special plan for your child, called an Individualized Education Program, to meet her needs.

- The school must have your written permission to put your child in a special class.

- Anytime you disagree with any decision the school makes about the education of your child, you have the right to ask for a "hearing" (a meeting) to challenge them. This process can be a little complicated, and you may want to ask someone from your parent's group or a community agency to help you through it.

Finally, you have the right to participate in decisions about your child's education.

- Your child's teachers need to talk with you before they make a decision like putting her in a special class or holding her back for a year. You can also appeal any decisions that are made that you don't agree with. This means that you can ask for a formal meeting with school personnel where you both will present reasons for making a decision about your child. Since this process can be confusing, it is good to ask your parents' group or a local community agency for help in preparing your case.

- You have the right to ask for help for your child if she is not doing well at school. This is where working as a team with the teacher can be especially helpful. You and the teacher together can think of new ways to help your child.

- Finally, remember that the law says that your child has a right to understand what is going on in her class. This means she has the right to bilingual or English as a Second Language classes if she needs them.

As you can see from these examples, when it comes to your rights to get involved in your child's school, **the only right you don't have is the right to remain silent!**

For additional information on your rights as a parent, call the National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE) toll-free Bilingual Hotline: 1-800-NETWORK (638-9675).

# Questions for Group Discussion

1) Ask members of the group:

Describe an experience where you feel you exercised your rights to be involved in your child's school.
- What happened?
- Were you happy with the outcome?
- If not, what would you do differently next time?

2) Ask group:

Do you feel the school teachers and administrators understand our culture well enough? If not, what are some specific examples of things they need to understand better?

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# What Is ASPIRA?

The ASPIRA Association, Inc. is a national nonprofit organization which since 1961 has served and advocated on behalf of Puerto Rican and other Latino youth. With major programmatic efforts in leadership development and education, ASPIRA also conducts research and informs plicymakers on issues critical to Latinos. Its ten offices are located in five states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. ASPIRA is the oldest and largest Hispanic youth organization in the country. Its central mission is advancing the development of the Latino community. To fulfill that mission, it provides over 13,000 youth annually with the emotional, intellectual, and practical resources they need to remain in school and contribute to their community.

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